

Politics, culture, and the modernisation of education in Bhutan

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Abstract

This chapter discusses a series of political and cultural transitions in Bhutan and their impact on the modernization of the education system. It traces the major shifts in government - from theocracy to monarchy to democratic monarchy – alongside the shifts in education - from a solely monastic system to the development of a secular, modern education system. But in this there are tensions; not least between ‘culture and tradition’ for so long infused into the education curriculum, and the current trend towards the embracement of modern ideas. Are these tensions irreducible? Will culture and tradition be eschewed completely as Bhutan adopts what seems to be an irreversible pathway towards a modern, some might suggest ‘Western’ system of education?

Introduction

Michael Rutland the former tutor to the Fourth King, described Bhutan prior to modernisation as ‘a virtually unknown kingdom, with no roads, no telephones, no mail service, no airports, and virtually no shops. The economy was almost entirely based on barter. Health care was primitive or non-existent, and schooling was confined to the monasteries’ (1999: 284).

And those who currently study Bhutan maintain that despite a degree of modernisation, much of its way of life has remained largely unchanged (Crins, 2008; Ueda, 2003). Even with significant levels of improvement to its physical infrastructure, it is still described as ‘a culturally secluded country’ (Balamurugan & Tobgay, 2008; Collister, 1991; Crins, 2008; Sinha, 1991; Solverson, 1995).

For some, the pace of change has not been rapid enough courting the suggestion that Bhutan shuns foreign influence to its detriment; while for others, it is precisely because of its geography and its expressed isolationist policies that its rich traditional culture has developed relatively undisturbed by external influence (Whitecross, 2008).

At the heart of the debate is education - in its form, purposes and functions. More precisely what role it plays in the political, social and economic life of the country. On the one hand, there is a strongly held view that national development and economic progress depends largely on a modern and globally aligned educational system; one that is responsive to a rapidly changing world economy and accommodative of the proliferation of new medias and technologies. And on the other, an equally strong belief that a modernised educational system that mirrors those of more industrialised societies, threatens distinctly social and cultural ways of learning and the patterns by which deeply held values and beliefs are communicated from one generation to another.

One might say then that as the education system in Bhutan shapes and reshapes itself there is a continuing tension between *conservation* and *extension*. The enduring question being whether Bhutan can find a way to preserve the modes and traditions through which knowledge is made while at the same time embrace new forms of thinking and new ways of learning; and of course, as it ascribes to the global ‘education for all’ drive, expand the share of its population participating in education. Or will culture and tradition be eschewed completely as Bhutan adopts what seems to be an irreversible pathway towards a modern some might suggest ‘Western’ system of education? This is a dilemma that sits at the heart of Bhutan’s struggle to afford its youth the opportunities associated with modernisation and global connectedness while at the same time, preserving its rich cultural and social patterns of meaning-making. How then is Bhutan navigating this pathway?

Recognising that educational change over time is anything but linear, this chapter employs a set of metaphors - *advent and consolidation*, *attraction and adoption*, *adaptation and indigenisation*, *extension and transformation*, and *differentiation and concordance* - to tease out the some of the main dilemmas of Bhutan’s modernisation project and the key elements of educational thinking and actions throughout different periods, some of which persist from one period to another.

The use of metaphors as a heuristic devise for tracing and comparing the trajectories of educational change in various countries builds on the rational offered in Johnson (2006). Then, as now the argument is that there is limited work in developing countries that documents and analyses swings in educational thinking or in educational policy and the contemporary or historical determinants that underpin them. A consequence is that many of these countries have

limited institutional reference points that hamper their capabilities to make informed policy decisions while leaving them vulnerable to ‘uninformed’ policy borrowing.

In the case of Bhutan as we shall see in this chapter, there is an excellent documentation every five years of the most pertinent educational problems, of policy thinking and of policy imperatives (the first to tenth five year plans starting in 1960ties). It is through an interrogation of these documents and through interviews of policy makers and senior educationalists (see Robles, 2014; Childs, Tenzin, Johnson and Ramachandran, 2010), formal consultations (Johnson, Childs, Ramachandran, and Tenzin, 2008) and focused group interviews (Johnson and Weber, 2009) that the major paradoxes and dualisms in educational thinking and action are uncovered.

‘*Advent and consolidation*’ marks the beginnings of a system of formal teachings in the 17th century and the consolidation of state, religion and education through most of the 18th and 19th century. The next period, ‘*attraction and adoption*’ is one in which Bhutan first flirts with modernisation and develops an interest in the possibilities of a different model of schooling. The period of ‘*adaptation and indigenisation*’ that follows represents the challenges associated with the imported model of schooling, of revision and reform, but also of alignment to national development goals. Then, ‘*extension and transformation*’ symbolises the attempt to seek alignment between but also mediate the effects of culturally strange ideas on local traditions and understandings. The final period ‘*differentiation and concordance*’ represents the current struggles and dilemma’s for Bhutan as it attempts to further expand its educational system but in a way that is distinctive. Fuelled by the notion of Gross National Happiness, this period is one in which Bhutan cautiously embraces modernisation while preserving and making distinctive the values and teachings of the past. In a word, it describes a more confident, more assertive Bhutan that looks to point the way for a model of education that strikes a balance between conservatism knowledge and values achieved through centuries of ‘teachings’ and careful expansionism into a new educational world that promises new opportunities for larger numbers of young people.

The trajectories of educational change in Bhutan

Advent and consolidation

The earliest forms of education in Bhutan are thought to have been the religious teachings of Padma Sambhava, an omniscient saint from the Swat Valley who visited Bhutan in AD 746 (Dorji, 2008: 18). But the development of a more formal monastic system of education is attributed to Zhabdrung Ngonwang Namgyel (1594-1651), a Tibetan abbot (Wangyal, 2006). Under his rule, a Central Monk Body was established for the purpose of providing formal education in ‘Buddhist philosophy, liturgical chanting, dialectics and linguistics’ (Stiles, 2009: 61).

Monastic education offered its students lessons in philosophy, ritual, and meditation techniques, which formed the core of the curriculum (Phuntsho, 2000). Students attained literacy in Chöke, a script used mainly for memorizing religious texts and for authoring legal documents (Gyatsho, 2004; Roder, 2012; van Dreim, 1994).

In addition to learning Chöke, monks also studied written and spoken *Dzongkha*, which was used for daily communication. The traditional curriculum included training in the arts, such as music and dance, painting, embroidery, and carving as well as studies in ‘astrology and astronomy, numerology and mathematics, calculation, book-keeping and accounting’ (Collister, 1988:13).

The completion of monastic education enabled monks to perform customary rituals in households and monasteries. But it also involved them ‘offering basic education, healing people, governing the village with village elders and providing moral and ethical guidance based on Buddhism’ (Ueda, 2003:331).

But Monastic education was restricted – both in terms of what it offered and to whom. Robles (2014) writes that the singular purpose of the monastic curriculum was to prepare a small number of students to become monks. Admission into monastic institutions was not widely available and undertaken mainly by boys from ‘privileged’ families (Penjore, 2005; Wangyal, 2006).

So, monastic education was restricted not only to wealthier families but also largely to males. Women were excluded, with the exception of a few nuns and even then Roder (2012) and Zangmo (2009) argue that the religious training provided to nuns was of a lower quality than the education provided to monks.

Upon completion of training, monks were considered well-educated and held prominent positions in society and were also qualified to undertake roles in the government. By contrast, educated nuns ostensibly held a lower status and were ineligible to engage in religious or political affairs (Roder, 2012; Zangmo, 2009).

Monastic Education in Bhutan thus assumed a particular form and function and was largely restrictive. But this in a theocracy did not pose a social or cultural particular problem.

Attraction and adoption

The political transition in Bhutan from a traditional theocracy to a monarchy in 1907 marked a change in the function of the government away from ‘maintaining the institution of religion’ to guiding the nation toward development; and shifting away from decades of self-imposed isolation from the outside world (Aris, 1994: 10). Although the Buddhist ideology of the country remained intact the primary function of the state was no longer solely religious. But having embarked on the road to national development Bhutan required an education system that would support this project; and it looked with interest at the British educational model.

Modern education started during the era of the first King, Ugyen Wangchuck (1907-1926). According to Aris (1994: 104-105), Ugyen Wangchuck and his chamberlain, Ugyen Dorji, were keen to develop modern education for selected boys. In 1914 a school was started in Haa, and in 1915 another school was founded at the king’s palace in Bumthang, especially for his heir and a few other boys. Also in 1914, forty-six boys were sent to a Scottish missionary school in Kalimpong, India.

Robles (2014) suggests that the decision to look outside the country for an education system suited to national development goals was steered by His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who may have been influenced by his own educational experience as a student in Kalimpong where he was educated in a ‘British manner’.

Ura (2010: 62) supports this assertion, and writes, ‘His Majesty drew influence from his visits to Scotland and Switzerland and chose elements that were suitable to Bhutan.’ It seems then that Bhutan’s ‘attraction’ (Phillips and Ochs, 1994) toward the ‘western’ model of education was

sparked by the third King's own experiences and perceptions of education in the West being a pillar of modernisation.

The first modern schools were established in the late 1950's in the Haa valley (Collister, 1991; Ura, 2010) and were supported by Great Britain. Indeed, they were modelled in the fashion of 'British independent schools' (Collister, 1991: 13), their form and content to all intents and purposes British. Interestingly, while the model of British schooling was the attraction, it was the fact that they had taken root in India that provided the impetus to their replication in Bhutan. Indeed, not only were these English-medium schools imported from India, so too were textbooks and teachers.

By the 1960s there were several such British Independent Schools in Bhutan but they were not unified by a common curriculum. Robles (2014) in her work points to the role of Father Mackey, a Canadian Jesuit priest who taught the children of King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, and claims that he had a significant influence on the development of modern education in Bhutan. Mackey drafted the first education policy document in 1963 (Solverson, 1995) and fashioned the content of the curriculum and the medium through which it was taught.

He faced two major difficulties. First, that of the selection of a language of instruction. Of over 17 dialects spoken in the country, *Chöke* was the only form of language that was written as well as spoken. However, *Chöke* was reserved solely for religious purposes and it was thus determined to be inappropriate as a medium of instruction in a secular system of education (Phuntsho, 2000). Dzongkha the national language, was also the dominant language used in the western region of Bhutan; however, if it were employed as the medium of instruction, Bhutanese students would find it difficult to pursue further educational studies outside of Bhutan.

English was eventually chosen as the medium of instruction in the secular school system, the perceived benefits outweighing the disadvantages. It was seen to be an 'international' language used widely in the neighbouring India (Solverson, 1995). Collister (1991) also points out that there were no secondary schools in Bhutan prior to the 1960s and selected groups of Bhutanese students attended secondary school in India.

The second challenge for Mackey was the modernisation of the curriculum. Mackey chose to use a curriculum borrowed from the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education that included the basic subjects of mathematics, science, history, and geography. His reasoning was that this would allow those who completed primary schooling in Bhutan to pursue secondary education in India. Furthermore, the Indian curriculum also prepared graduates to enter Indian colleges. Enabling graduates to pursue further studies abroad was important because Bhutan had no universities in the early 1960's (Solverson, 1995).

This being as it may, the problem was that there were no qualified Bhutanese teachers to teach the curriculum or school administrators to run the schools. Father Mackey filled these positions with staff from India (Solverson 1995; Ueda, 2000), thus introducing to Bhutan a wholly foreign model.

And this was met with some resistance. One of the biggest problems for Bhutan in this period was that many Bhutanese considered the modern system of education alien (Dyenka, 1999; Solverson, 1995; Stiles, 2009; Ueda, 2000) and were sceptical of its social utility (Phuntsho, 2000). It is interesting therefore that the first students were conscripted into schooling. And despite efforts to indigenise the curriculum many still referred to the system as a 'colonial relic' (Tobgye, 2012).

It is clear then that the introduction of modern education had far reaching consequences. Phuntsho (2000: 97) argues that the shift from traditional (mainly monastic) and modern education led many people to believe that monastic communities were ‘non-productive’ and ‘social parasites’ in economic terms, and that the traditional education system was ‘a resilient left-over from the past’ (2000: 112).

Adaptation and indigenisation

By the 1980s, a more considerable educational infrastructure had been developed. The foreign model of schooling had been extended more widely and so too the thinking about the utility of schooling. In this period Bhutan adopted its Fifth Development Plan (1981–1986) that included the following objectives:

‘to provide educated and trained manpower to meet the growing needs of development programmes; to bring about a modernisation of society by introducing them to science and technology and thereby enabling them to join the mainstream of contemporary civilization; and, to preserve and promote the country's rich cultural and spiritual heritage, preventing the alienation of the educated from this heritage’ (ibid).

The paradox of modernisation and preservation presented itself more sharply in this period. The challenge it seems was to adapt the form and content of schooling to suit the national character of Bhutan while recognising that the country’s broader goals had changed. National development was the watchword and an educated and trained ‘manpower’ the ultimate goal. But not it seems at the cost of losing its spiritual and cultural heritage. And, there was an additional if persistent challenge. How to adapt the model of schooling imported from Britain via India, teachers and all.

By the start of the Sixth Five Year Plan (1987–1992) several successive education reforms had sought to both contextualise the curriculum and orient schooling toward national development goals. Its objectives were justified as follows:

‘...having been structured on the Indian system, the education system in Bhutan needs to be reformed to relate it to the values, environment and the history of Bhutanese people’ (Planning Commission, 1987: 33).

The educational challenges for Bhutan in this period was to both point the system in the direction of national development and reform it so that it was more Bhutanese in character and outlook. Both the fifth and sixth five-year plans emphasised the conservation of traditional Bhutanese heritage and the ‘re-orientation’ of the curriculum to make the content relevant to the Bhutanese people.

Extension and transformation

Since its first five-year plan the Royal Government of Bhutan had made significant investments to expand modern education alongside monastic education. Between 1997 and 2007 Bhutan adopted the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Five Year Plans. This was a decade that saw rapid social transformation in Bhutan, increased international engagement (Crins, 2008) and an educational system striving to keep up. The formal introduction of television and the Internet in 2001 and the shift in state leadership from monarchy to democratic monarchy in 2008 created ‘massive anxiety about cultural change and loss’ (Roder, 2012).

Indeed, World Bank data shows that Internet users rose from 1% of the population in 2001 to 25% of the population in 2012 (World Bank EdStats). Net enrolments in secondary education rose from 34.7% in 2005 to 56.8% in 2012 and unemployment dropped from 3.8% of the total labour force to 2.1%. The rapid growth in work opportunities and the growth in international communications brought Bhutan in much closer contact with the international community than it had ever been before. Participation in education had risen exponentially as had literacy rates. According to the Bhutan Living Standard Survey (2003) the literacy rate for the 10-14 year age group was 75.3%.

Unsurprisingly, the prominence and prestige of the English language grew as did, perceptibly so according to Robles (2014), the social preferences for Western culture and values.

Understandably, the prolific rise in the use of the English language and its accessibility through both electronic and print media presented a concern to the cultural conservationists. It was seen to threaten the usage of Dzongkha and other local languages (Dorjee, 2006, Wangyal, 2001). But, there was also a wider concern that the rise of the English language distorted perceptions of what it meant to be a person capable of making a contribution to society – economically, socially or politically. Phuntsho (2000: 112) argues that in a modern Bhutan, being literate meant having fluency in the English language. And as Dorjee's (2006: 126) study revealed, for most Bhutanese, 'English is regarded as a language of education, social status, social position, and prestige' while local languages are seen by some to represent traditional (pre-modern) Bhutan and as such, have little value in modern life. And economically, Roder (2012) suggests that English language fluency is now a requirement for entry into positions in the civil service.

But the impact of these social changes on traditional ways of life had not gone unnoticed. The National Human Development Report (Planning Commission Secretariat, 2000) for example states that the social changes associated with the country's planned development, may lead to conflict as a result of changes in traditional lifestyles and holds that developing the nation will 'depend on mitigating the foreseeable conflict between traditional cultural values and the modern lifestyles that inevitably follow in the wake of development' (ibid: 18).

By the time of the Eighth Plan for Development (1997–2002) the imported model of schooling had been expanded, but it had also been 'largely been localized' through reforms in the preceding years (Ministry of Planning, 1997). But what did localisation amount to?

Johnson et al (2008) in their study of the localisation of the science curriculum in Bhutan suggest that localisation of the curriculum could not be divorced from the disciplinary basis of that curriculum. They reflect:

'In our observations of lessons and from the teacher interviews we found students motivated and engaged. The classes had a good deal of student centred learning and the curriculum encouraged localization of science and we did see teachers drawing on examples of science from the locality in their teaching. The textbooks also encouraged this approach. For example, in one lesson we observed students were asked to collect litter from the school grounds. The students did this with some enthusiasm and then, when the students returned to the classroom, they were encouraged to think about grouping and classifying the litter thus developing their skills of grouping and classification' (2008:14)

but

‘...we saw activities successfully carried out with little or no scientific conceptual underpinning accompanying the activity. (ibid)

Hence, the Ninth Plan for Development (2002–2007) called for a whole school approach to integrate traditional values into the school community ‘through exemplary activities, participatory rules and organizational models in classrooms and schools’ (ibid: 72).

The concept of Gross National Happiness began to feature more prominently in educational policy thinking. The thinking it seems was to re-envision modern schooling; somehow to strip it of elements that were considered alien to traditional values and to redefine its purpose.

Differentiation and concordance

The Tenth Plan (2008–2013) describes the ‘rapid socio-economic transformation’ being experienced by Bhutan and the country’s cultural heritage is seen as an important tool to balance out the influences of globalisation and its attendant pressures and impacts (Planning Commission, 2008: 15).

Much of the educational thinking in this period struck a note of concordance between modernisation and differentiation; the need for a different and distinctive model that was at once aligned to an irreversible tendency towards cultural and economic modernisation and cultural preservation.

But what was it about the modernisation / conservation project that would need to be distinctive? The challenge for Bhutan was to find a balance - importantly, one that did not favour rapid expansion while simply paying lip service to the importance of culture and tradition. In this it was supported by the intellectual position that a traditional way of life is not always incompatible with or in opposition to a modern curriculum (McGovern, 1999).

Robles found a striking ambivalence amongst the senior educationalists that she interviewed. For them, modernisation and what it means to be modern was tied to Western notions of development (e.g. urbanization, a democratic government and economic development) and popular culture from the West. While, on one level, educational and national modernisation was considered by the participants to be a ‘good thing’ for Bhutan; on another level, it was seen to be antagonistic to traditional ways of knowing and ways of life.

In support of this position, Robles (2014) too points to the work of Cowen’s (1996: 158) who found that in many countries education reforms aligned to modernisation have allowed for ‘old structures to work in new ways (West Germany with its retention of stratified secondary education) or new structures to work in old ways (Japan with its combination of an American school structure and Japanese examining practices).’

Similarly, Inglehart and Welzel (2005: 19), in their revised theory on modernisation find cultural traditions to be relatively independent of economic progress. Inglehart and Welzel (ibid 20) explain:

Although socioeconomic development brings predictable long-term changes in what people believe and want out of life, the influence of cultural traditions does not disappear. Belief systems have a remarkable durability and resilience. While values

can and do change, they continue to reflect a society's historical heritage. Cultural change is path dependant.

In other words, tradition and culture and ways of looking at the world will continue to exert influence on social changes. Robles (2014) refers to Shipman 1971 who argues that Japan's education system was deliberately employed to rapidly advance modernisation, initially in 1847 and again in 1941 (Shipman, 1971). At the same time, schooling was also used to uphold the traditional discipline of society by conveying traditional religious beliefs and instilling national pride (Shipman, 1971). For these scholars, Western forms of education support both the continuity of traditional culture and aspirations for modernity.

Inspired by the knowledge that a modern educational system can support a modern agenda while at the same time carry forward traditional values and ways of meaning-making, Bhutan began to assert more strongly the concept of Gross National Happiness. The Tenth Five Year Plan (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008: 108) emphasises that values education should be inculcated in schools as a way to mitigate the 'erosion of conventional social values due to rapid modernisation.'

Today, the concept of GNH is gaining increasing international attention in contemporary Bhutan, most recently with its 2012 adoption by the United Nations as an economic development paradigm. What emerges is a clear thrust in policy text and discourse toward Bhutan's distinctive notion of modernisation, which calls for 'maintain[ing] a harmony between economic forces, spiritual and cultural values' by positioning GDP equally alongside GNH (Planning Commission Secretariat, 2000).

The effects of educational modernisation on culture and society

We turn now to look at the effects of educational modernisation on the social, cultural and economic lives of Bhutanese people.

According to Ura (2010), the early modernisation process in Bhutan brought many benefits. There was an onset of a 'democratic polity' in which bonded labourers were set free, commodity taxes were converted to cash taxes, a National Assembly was established, and a series of laws were developed. Robles (2014) suggests that these social and political changes provided the foundations for the First Five Year plan that focused mainly on infrastructural modernisation. This included the development of 'roads, power, communication system, transport, agriculture and animal husbandry,' and the building of modern institutions, such as schools (Planning Commission, 1961: 1).

The early modernisation process paved the way for the modernisation of the education system and the introduction of schools; but this was met with resistance. Many parents did not see the benefits of schooling and preferred to keep their children at home. The government it seems took steps to achieve equitable access to education. One senior politician interviewed by Robles (2014) reveals that in his *gewog* a mule track divided the better off from the less well off. To ensure fairness, one child was selected from above the mule track and another from below to attend school. Students from below the mule track in years to come it seems have held equally prominent positions in the government as their counterparts from above the mule track.

Despite this many high-level officials have remained critical of the Western model of education seeing it as 'alien' to the Bhutan. As we have seen from the discussion above, the modern

schooling system complete with textbooks and teachers were imported from Britain by way of neighbouring India; the purpose being to establish rapidly a modern system of education able to contribute to the goals of the First Plan for Development.

So interestingly, the early modernisation period laid the ground for the rapid expansion of modern education that in turn caused a dramatic series of changes to Bhutanese society. We discuss some of these changes here:

Culturally and socially, the rapid pace of change in Bhutan drove a wedge between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ worlds and a demand for people to make sense of their daily lives with reference to both ‘worlds’. Inglehart and Welzel (2006) offer the example of a parent engaged in agricultural livelihood relying on ‘traditional’ rationales to explain the unpredictable forces of nature, while their son or daughter attends a secondary school in an urban area studying science and technology as the sources of authority on matters of daily life.

Living in different worlds also seen in this quote from Whitecross (forthcoming) who lived with a family in Bhutan while doing his research there:

‘From them I began to learn about and refine my understanding of Bhutanese life, culture and concerns. The youngest nephew was a traditionally trained amchi (doctor) who had completed his studies not in Bhutan but at the Chakpori Institute of Tibetan Medicine in Darjeeling. Initially educated in a small primary school in Dechencholing, a few miles north of the capital, Thimphu, he later attended school in Thimphu before studying at the Chakpori. His older brother after briefly attending primary school entered a monastery at a young age in Bhutan before being placed in a new monastery established near Kathmandu. By his late twenties, he had completed his formal education at a Tibetan monastery in southern India and been appointed as a teacher in the monastery’s philosophy college (shedra). Unlike the brothers, their mother lacked formal education as did her sister. However, their mother recited prayers memorised from being taught orally to her as a child and later by her husband, a gomchen (lay religious practitioner). Their uncle, a former monk from north-eastern Bhutan and educated in a monastery was able to read and write in classical Tibetan. His education reflected the typical monastic/religious education that was the only form of education available in Bhutan until the early 1960s. He could calculate and prepare astrological charts, prepare and assist at religious ceremonies and acted as the local gomchen for other Bhutanese families. However, although he received a traditional education and values his understanding and knowledge of Buddhist teachings, Uncle would describe himself as “ignorant” and “without knowledge” compared to his either his two nephews or his only daughter, Kesang, a primary school teacher now working in central Bhutan’.

Politically, according to Whitecross (forthcoming), it was the introduction of the secular system of education that readied Bhutan for its transition towards parliamentary democracy. Whitecross uses education as the heuristic to examine and reflect on the political evolution of Bhutan and the role that the current legal system and institutions have played in creating the conditions for democratisation. He remarks:

‘The remarkably smooth process of democratisation in the period from 1998 to 2008 built on the foundations created by the development of secular education during the second half of the twentieth century... and the rapid recent transformation of the Bhutanese state reflects the impact of, and the challenges created by, secular education’.

Economically, Crins (forthcoming) suggests that there is an emergence of a consumer culture in Bhutan and critiques the role of Gross National Happiness in this. Gross National Happiness she argues ‘is a strategy for social and economic change which should be understood as a process that seeks to maximise happiness rather than economic growth, to seek a balance of spiritual needs and material needs’. Rather, she finds symbols of change associated with capital accumulation and market forces. These are perhaps most clearly observable in the capital Thimphu which according to her ‘is booming with new buildings, shops and more and more cars’. The changes in Bhutan are steered at present by unprecedented economic growth; GDP grew at an average of 9.6% over the Ninth Plan period between 2003 and 2007, taking into consideration an estimated growth of over 21.4% in 2007. GDP per capita in 2006 was estimated at US\$ 1,414.01 as compared to US\$ 835 in 2002 (Tenth year plan).

This view of rapid change is also examined by Fiore (forthcoming) who turns our attention to the changes being brought about by modernization, in particular through the increasing use and availability of ICTs. He questions whether the intergenerational transmission of traditional forms of knowledge— seen as key to empowering sustainable livelihoods and well-being and essential to cultural projects such as religion— are declining in the current climate of social change. He posits that the current re-prioritization of knowledge acquisition is evident in Bhutan, with the practice of rites and rituals performed by *gomchhens* (lay monks) in danger of extinction.

Similarly, Roder (forthcoming) examines the effects of modern education on career aspirations and employment prospects of the youth. She argues that the modern educational system, in ways similar elsewhere has produced what is being described as ‘the crisis’ of youth unemployment. She argues that current understandings of appropriate aspirations are not only gendered but also linked to assumptions about class and education, and that “waiting” is a career strategy that brings these potential differences into sharp relief.

But it is Ueda who probes the impacts of education in the rural regions of Bhutan and offers us a glimpse of the multiplicity and scale of the impact the school education has had in the society. In Bhutan, as in other developing countries, tensions may arise when the aims of formal schooling are incongruent with the realities of the job market. In rural societies, schooling often engenders shifts in students’ expectations for employment. She quotes one of her respondents as saying: that education cannot be considered entirely successful because ‘it only encourages people to leave their farm land’. As Roder (forthcoming) also found, one of the most pressing issues in the education sector is that young people cannot find a suitable job after leaving school, but are not coming back to their villages either, and more and more land is being left uncultivated.

Educationally, the modernisation of the educational system has had a impact on teachers and teaching. Robles (forthcoming) studied the extent to which shifts in curriculum emphasis with a focus on traditional knowledge was mediated in the classroom. She found that for some teachers it was easier to discard traditional knowledge in favour of ‘modern’ scientific explanations. For others, it was important to strike a balance – to provide both explanations – but this was time consuming; and for other still, there was an attempt to fuse knowledge so that both traditional and modern explanations were taught.

An examination of the discourse at the political and policy level is provided in Robles’ chapter whose findings indicate a number of tensions stemming from the conflicting aims of education— i.e., the imperative of education to advance socioeconomic development while, at the same time, conserving and promoting ‘traditional’ knowledge and values. Her chapter shows a variety of complex, fuzzy, and overlapping perspectives on the modernisation of the education system.

'Many teachers reported that Bhutanese 'traditional' knowledge – or particular aspects of it – should be 'diluted,' 'left behind,' or excluded from the 'modern' curriculum...For these teachers, traditional knowledge was presented as subordinate. The curriculum was perceived to prioritize Western perspectives over indigenous ways of knowing across a range of curriculum subjects. This theme was rendered in high relief in science subjects'.

Conclusions

The chapter started by asking whether, as the education system in Bhutan shapes and reshapes itself, it can find a way to preserve the modes and traditions through which knowledge is made while at the same time embrace new forms of thinking and new ways of learning; whether culture and tradition be eschewed completely as Bhutan adopts what seems to be an irreversible pathway towards modernisation.

The chapter traced the pathways of educational change through different historical periods each marked by successive five-year plans and considered the effects of education on the social, cultural and economic life-worlds of Bhutanese society.

We learned that Educational change in Bhutan is inextricably intertwined with modernisation and national development and that the early stages of modernisation in Bhutan laid the groundwork for educational modernisation; and that came to Bhutan in the form of a 'borrowed' model. And as with all examples where educational systems are transplanted from one context to another, they court resistance from the local population and challenges that often take years to resolve – if ever! In the case of Bhutan choices made in respect of the language of instruction for example continue to plague educationalists and policy-makers. This appears unresolvable save for a major upheaval such as we have seen some many years ago in Malaysia or Tanzania where 'imported' languages were abolished in favour of national languages (or other imported languages). This of course led to other difficulties and is a pathway ill advised.

We have seen too that an imported curriculum, complete with textbooks and teachers have led to continuing difficulties in localisation. This is still today an on-going project for Bhutan.

We have learned too that reforms of the educational system so that it is aligned with traditional knowledges and ways of knowing creates extraordinary challenges for teachers, many who have never been trained to mediate between indigenous knowledge and modern 'scientific' knowledge in their daily imparting of a subject.

The modernisation project, including the modernisation of the educational system in Bhutan did much good – in improving literacy and educational uptake with the possibilities of democratic participation; but for some, the project has been harmful – traditional values and ways of life had been displaced. That fast capitalism and rampant technologies are overtaking subtler ways of economic life and forms of communications. For some this is inevitable – it is what modernisation is! For others, there is hope that the distinctiveness that Bhutan seeks to carve out in its educational system, framed by the concept of Gross National Happiness, might yet be in time to save the country from being completely subsumed in the wake of that fast moving juggernaut we call globalisation.

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